

# The Return to Dingolfing

By Alex Taft

After a three-year hiatus, the Highlanders are back in Germany. The Dingolfing Exchange Program, where OHHS students get the experience of living with a German family and attending school in the Bavarian town of Dingolfing, is back in action. The program, coordinated by Mr. Scheinder in even years, and German teachers Mr. Vaske and Mrs. Schott in odd years such as this one, has provided a valuable opportunity for cultural exchange between the Germans and us Americans since 1985, as well as a simply unforgettable cultural immersion experience.

Though the German students will unfortunately not be coming to live in America this year, as has been tradition since the program's founding, everyone is excited that the trip is back from COVID in any capacity. Hopes are high, with Mrs. Schott stating that "This is a rebuilding year for us and our hope is that both the American and German students enjoy such an enriching experience that it reignites that fire to travel and learn, encouraging future exchange students at Oak Hills and in Dingolfing to take that leap and make the trip!" Even with this year's trip to Dingolfing being one of rebuilding, the "fire to travel and learn" that gets ignited by this program cannot be understated. This sentiment is shared by Mr. Vaske, who upon being asked what he enjoys most about the program, explained, "As a German teacher, my favorite part is when the students arrive in Germany and their chins hit the ground! That WOW moment that lasts the whole trip as they are amazed by the country and people that I have such a love for. Also, those moments when students come and say, 'Hey look, that's that thing that we talked about in class...it's real!' All of those moments make all of the effort and late nights of work completely

worth it. It totally makes my heart melt when they say how amazing Germany is." There's clearly much to look forward to for this year's program. Despite being different from programs past, the shock and awe, that "wow moment" of being able to step foot in Germany and sight-see after years of learning about the German language, people, and culture, remains the same, and will continue to motivate Highlanders to travel and learn. Beyond being simply unforgettable, the Dingolfing exchange experience provides a life experience unlike any other. On the value of



participating in the program, Mr. Vaske details: "I feel that it is important because it gives our students an opportunity to experience something amazing that they wouldn't ever have a chance to experience otherwise. The things they learn on the trip are both about themselves and also about the world in which we live. They get a chance to see what they are capable of doing when taken out of their comfortable Oak Hills world and put into a situation where things are similar, but just different enough to challenge them to think a little differently. When they are there, they will meet people who do things just differently enough to make them think about someone else's opinions." Learning from the world around is an important aspect of living, and the Dingolfing Exchange Program provides a perfect opportunity for any Oak Hills student to do so. By being thrust into a place that's in so many ways similar and yet in so many ways different from Cincinnati, one's mind is challenged to see the world differently and learn from the world around them. Concurring with Mr. Vaske's take, Mrs. Schott explains, "There are so many

advantages to getting involved in our exchange program, but if I have to choose a favorite, it's seeing our students benefit exponentially from taking themselves out of their comfort zones. When they allow themselves to be exposed to and become entrenched in this new language and culture, THAT is precisely when the most learning takes place." Having the opportunity to spend three weeks in Germany, living with a German family and attending a German school, will certainly take any student out of their comfort zone. That's what makes the program so advantageous to take part in. Through hands-on life



experiences in Germany, students will see, hear, try, and learn new things that will stick with them for a lifetime.

It's fantastic to see the return of such an amazing program, though it has certainly faced some hurdles. There was of course the COVID pandemic that shut down the program initially, but as well as COVID, there have been other issues in organizing another trip. In discussion over some of these issues, Mr. Vaske specifies: "Our biggest problem this year has been communication. We are very behind schedule and that has caused a little trouble. First of all, I am at Rapid Run this year and not the High School. Secondly, one of the German teachers on the German side waited to let us know that she would not be coordinating the program. So then we had to wait to have someone volunteer to do that on their side. Also, coming out of the Covid Pandemic has made things awkward as Germans have to build up trust to let someone in their homes again." Notwithstanding struggles with communication and COVID, however, the determination to make this trip happen has allowed for it to be properly organized. Mr. Vaske continues, "But, we have managed to find German coordinators and German hosts and are quickly getting back on track. It's not going to be a textbook exchange, but this

half-program is going to be way better than nothing. Our Oak Hills students will still be able to go and live with a German family and experience what German culture is all about. That's our mission and we are doing everything we can to make sure we meet that mission for our students this summer." In perseverance to create a valuable exchange experience for Oak Hills students, coordinators and hosts for the trip have been organized, making this year's program possible. Albeit not resembling the full programs of the past, managing to hold any program at all in 2023 is a great feat, with Mrs. Schott sharing a similar perspective to Mr. Vaske: "Due to lingering Covid issues, the German students were not permitted to visit OHHS in September this year, so the fact that we are still able to visit them this summer and be guests in their homes is a dream come true for us!" The 2023 dream exchange is underway, and absolutely no hurdle will stop it!



Since 1985, the Dingolfing Exchange Program has provided OHHS students with a valuable cultural experience that changes the way they see the world. By stepping foot in Germany, living with a German family, attending a German school, and making new, lasting friendships with German partners, the program has delivered a lasting influence to those who have attended. Mrs. Schott has used a fantastic word to describe the impact of the experience: "In German, the word 'Wanderlust' means the desire to travel, explore and experience. When our trip delivers that, we are successful and it benefits our students for a lifetime." In spite of all struggles with being arranged, this year's trip is sure to instill Wanderlust in every Highlander who makes the trip, and that Wanderlust will stick with them for the rest of their lives. So what are you waiting for? Pack your bags and head to Germany!

Full transcripts of the interviews with Mr. Vaske and Mrs. Schott are available for reading below for all interested in looking at what this program has to offer in more depth!

## Full Interview with Mr. Vaske

Red = Question, Blue = Answer

**Why is the Dingolfing Exchange Program a valuable experience?**

The Oak Hills Dingolfing Program has been in existence since 1985. Our mission is to expose Oak Hills students to German language, culture, people and traditions by immersing them into a family environment and pairing them with a German teenager with a similar personality and interests. I feel that it is important because it gives our students an opportunity to experience something amazing that they wouldn't ever have a chance to experience otherwise. The things they learn on the trip are both about themselves and also about the world in which we live. They get a chance to see what they are capable of doing when taken out of their comfortable Oak Hills world and put into a situation where things are similar, but just different enough to challenge them to think a little differently. When they are there, they will meet people who do things just differently enough to make them think about someone else's opinions.

**What has your past experience with the program been like?**

I do the program on the odd-numbered years and Herr Schneider does the program on the even-numbered years. This will be my sixth trip. I have had nothing but an amazing time with all of the students who have gone and have made many lifelong friends both in Dingolfing as well as with the students who have gone. Everyone who goes can't wait to go back.

**What are your hopes for this year's trip?**

This year will be a little different than in years past. Normally the students would already know each other because the Germans would have already spent 3 weeks with us here in the USA. This time, that part didn't happen. We are going to go to Germany and the students will only know the Germans through the social media contacts that they have made. I hope that with this new setup, that all the students will be matched well. That match-up makes a key friendship that can and has lasted for a lifetime. I still have stories of German students and their Oak Hills partners meeting up years later. That's one of my key goals is for people to make that friendship connection.

**What is your favorite part about the program?**

As a German teacher, my favorite part is when the students arrive in Germany and their chins hit the ground! That WOW moment that lasts the whole trip as they are amazed by the country and people that I have such a love for. Also, those moments when students come and say, "Hey look, that's that thing that we talked about in class...it's real!" All of those moments make all of the effort and late night of work completely worth it. It totally makes my heart melt when they say how amazing Germany is.

**Have there been any hurdles in launching the program this year?**

Our biggest problem this year has been communication. We are very behind schedule and that has caused a little trouble. First of all, I am at Rapid Run this year and not the High School. Secondly, one of the German teachers on the German side waited to let us know that she would not be coordinating the program. So then we had to wait to have someone volunteer to do that on their side, Also, coming out of the Covid Pandemic has made things awkward as Germans have to build up trust to let someone in their homes again. But, we have managed to find German coordinators and German hosts and are quickly getting back on track. It's not going to be a textbook exchange, but this half-program is going to be way better than nothing. Our Oak Hills students will still be able to go and live with a German family and experience what German culture is all about. That's our mission and we are doing everything we can to make sure we meet that mission for our students this summer.

## Full Interview With Mrs. Schott

Red = Question, Blue = Answer

**Why is the Dingolfing Exchange Program a valuable experience?**

Having the opportunity to host a German student in your home and later live with them for 3 weeks in Dingolfing, Germany is truly a life-changing experience! Not only does your understanding of their language and culture increase at warp speed, but you also make life-long friendships, discover a beautiful new part of the world, and learn volumes about yourself.

**What has your past experience with the program been like?**

This program has been one of my proudest achievements as a teacher. Summer after summer in the 25 + years that I have been involved, I have been lucky enough to experience Germany through the eyes of my students and watch them grow as global citizens because of it. Throughout the years, hundreds of students (and their parents!) have later told me that this trip changed the direction of their lives, built their confidence for the future, showed them an entirely new way of viewing the world, and ultimately, helped to shape the individuals they were becoming.

**What are your hopes for this year's trip?**

This is a rebuilding year for us and our hope is that both the American and German students enjoy such an enriching experience that it reignites that fire to travel and learn, encouraging future exchange students at Oak Hills and in Dingolfing to take that leap and make the trip!

**What is your favorite part about the program?**

There are so many advantages to getting involved in our exchange program, but if I have to choose a favorite, it's seeing our students benefit exponentially from taking themselves out of their comfort zones. When they allow themselves to be exposed to and become entrenched in this new language and culture, THAT is precisely when the most learning takes place. Furthermore, I cannot count how many students decide to return! Social media has created an added bonus that allows students to connect instantaneously! It is now easier than ever to stay in contact and facilitate visits to their new friends and host families, travel with them, attend graduations and weddings, participate in university exchanges, accept internships, take jobs, and much more. This is truly what I love most, when our trip inspires students to return to their host countries and continue their exploration. In German, the word "Wanderlust" means the desire to travel, explore and experience. When our trip delivers that, we are successful and it benefits our students for a lifetime.

**Have there been any hurdles in launching the program this year?**

Due to lingering Covid issues, the German students were not permitted to visit OHHS in September this year, so the fact that we are still able to visit them this summer

and be guests in their homes is a dream come true for us! Staying with families is the backbone of our program because we are immersed in the German language and culture during that time and it provides us with authentic insight into what German life is truly like! All of the Oak Hills German teachers and the Dingolfing English teachers came together to make this year's unlikely trip become a reality!